Implementing Task-Based Language Teaching in Vietnamese Secondary Schools: What Hinders EFL Teachers?

Tham My Duong
Faculty of English, Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, Vietnam
<thamdm@uef.edu.vn>

Huyen Thi Thanh Nguyen
Nguyen An Ninh Secondary School, Vietnam
<josette0617@gmail.com>

Abstract

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has aroused interest of researchers as well as practitioners in education worldwide since the 1980s. In Vietnam, TBLT has recently been promoted in EFL/ESL education at all levels to develop learners' communicative competence; as a result, EFL teachers need to take major shifts in learning objectives, learning activities, teaching techniques, materials, assessment methods, etc. into consideration. This study aimed to explore the secondary school EFL teachers' challenges they have faced during the task-based teaching process. Ninety-six teachers working as full-time teachers of English at sixteen secondary schools in Vung Tau City, Vietnam answered a closed-ended questionnaire and participated in semi-structured interviews. The results indicated that the participants faced two types of challenges, namely objective and subjective when TBLT was implemented in their language classrooms. The objective challenges, in particular, consisted of class size, incompatibility between the curriculum and the focus of TBLT, preparation time, uncertainty about teacher's role, and deteriorating English grammatical competence, whereas lack of assessment skills for task-based learning performance was considered the most problematic subjective cause to them. Noticeably, the participants showed the willingness to apply TBLT because of their adequate knowledge of TBLT and sufficient English proficiency.

Keywords: challenges, TBLT, Vietnamese EFL teachers

Tasked-based Language Teaching in the Vietnamese Context

The emergence of English as a lingua franca has led to a great many changes in language teaching and learning all over the world. The shifts recorded in the history of language education include teaching methods (e.g., Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method, Audiolingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching, Task-based Language Teaching, Computer-based Language Teaching, etc.), teaching policies, teaching practices, language assessment and testing, and so forth. In the context of Vietnam where EFL teachers and students are familiar with long-standing teacher-centred approaches, e.g., Grammar-Translation Method and Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP), Vietnamese students seem to be too teacher-dependent (Duong, 2015). As a consequence, Vietnamese students may fail to master language skills as well as gain confidence to communicate in English-based contexts.

With the aim to develop communicative competence for Vietnamese students, the project "Teaching and Learning of Foreign Languages in the National Education System, 2008-2020," launched by MOET (Decision No. 1400/QĐ -TTg, 2008), has made significant changes in the national English curriculum, two of which consist of the official approval of new English textbooks for a ten-year English programme (Le & Barnard, 2009; MOET, 2010) and the innovation in teaching methodology focusing on TBLT not only at primary, secondary, high school but also at university (MOET, 2010).

As a teacher of English in a secondary school in Vung Tau City, one of the researchers recognizes some challenges in applying TBLT in her language classrooms despite the availability of the training courses for secondary school teachers of English offered by Ba Ria-Vung Tau Department of Education and Training (BRVT-DOET). Therefore, this study endeavours to examine possible challenges the secondary school teachers in Vung Tau City encountered in task-based EFL classrooms, from which the study makes some suggestions to better the use of TBLT in EFL classrooms. Based on the research objective, the research questions are formulated as follows.

1. What are objective challenges that the secondary school teachers in Vung Tau City have encountered in task-based EFL classrooms?

2. What are subjective challenges that the teachers have encountered in task-based EFL classrooms?

Literature Review

The Concept of TBLT

The considerable interest in TBLT in language teaching and learning has led to various viewpoints on concept of TBLT so far. Originally, task-based language teaching derived from the task-based approach that was firstly introduced in secondary school classes in Bengalore, India by Prabhu (1987). Shehadeh (2005) pointed out that there has been a rapid growth of TBLT for more than thirty years with a wide range of studies addressing its different aspects (Ellis, 2017; Nunan, 2004; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Willis & Willis, 2007). According to Kumaravadivelu (2006), TBLT was the later version of Communicative Language Teaching which puts an emphasis on language use for real communication taken from authentic contexts. In other words, learners learn the target language through the process of experiencing it in the classroom. Likewise, Ellis (2003) viewed language learners in TBLT as language users who actively use the language as a means of communication in real life. Moreover, students will make constant efforts once they are motivated to get exposure to the language they are learning, so real-like communicative tasks become a fundamental aspect of a task-based approach (Willis, 1996).

Challenges in the Implementation of Task-Based Activities

Notwithstanding the benefits of TBLT in language education, some researchers (Adams & Newton, 2009; Littlewood, 2007) presented some challenges EFL teachers have faced when they apply TBLT in Asian contexts falling into two groups: objective and subjective obstacles. Within the scope of this study, the former refers to class size, classroom management, the use of mother tongue, etc. while the latter involves teachers' role and teachers' evaluation skills.

The use of mother tongue. Carless (2007) claimed that mother tongue or the first language (L1) has both positive and negative effects in task-based classrooms. On the one hand, mother tongue may be used as a supportive factor for task instructions and collaborative learning among students during the task cycle (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). On the other hand, Skehan (1998) was afraid that students are too reliant on the L1 if they are allowed to use L1 in a task. Moreover, the purpose of a communicative task is to get students exposed to the language environment, so L1 overuse may affect the efficiency of a task-based lesson. In reality, however, EFL learners' different levels of English proficiency have led to some confusion about whether or not mother tongue should be used in the classroom. In particular, high achievers feel interested in English learning activities while low achievers may feel discouraged and unwilling to join them. The unwillingness may cause communication breakdowns in completing the tasks, and, as a result, influence students' motivation and interaction in the classroom. In sum, increasing motivation and interaction is of greater importance in task performance of TBLT. Hence, it is vital to consider the flexible use of mother tongue in task-based classrooms as Tang (2002, p. 41) affirmed, "the limited and judicious use of the mother tongue in the English classroom does not reduce students' exposure to English, but rather can assist in the teaching and learning processes."

Class size. Regarding class size, big classes are mostly problematic to task-based group work. Carless (2004) revealed that teachers' worries about noise and disciplines prevent them from the application of task-based teaching approach. Yang (2006) asserted that small class size might give students more opportunities to drill spoken skills than bigger ones which were assumed to cause uncontrollable and unwelcome noise (Bruton, 2005; Carless, 2007; Li, 1998) and other factors such as time, task-based techniques, etc. More specifically, in terms of time, the teacher has to spend more time making plans for task-based lessons and managing a task in a big class. To secondary schools, teachers have to tightly accomplish the schedule of the syllabus, so limited time is considered a constraint to teachers (Yim, 2009). More noticeably, McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) showed that teachers needed a lot of time to get acquainted to TBLT practices. In addition, a large class probably affects choice of task-based techniques in a class as the space or the number of students does not allow teachers to carry out tasks as planned. In a small class, for example, each student probably has an opportunity to present his/her own ideas after group or pair work, whereas it seems impossible to do so in a large class.

Assessment. According to Bygate, Skehan & Swain (2001), both form and meaning received a parallel importance during the learning process. Willis (1996) also confirmed that learners could achieve the fluency and accuracy of language use in communicative tasks. As a process-oriented approach, TBLT is used to emphasize communicative language teaching at the centre of syllabus design and instructional goals (Nunan, 2004; Richards, 2005); therefore, task-based language teaching requires teachers to make use of their own linguistics resources to assess learners' performance in both direct and indirect ways (Ellis, 2003). Nevertheless, teachers in some studies (Dao, 2016; Joen, 2005) admitted that they are not confident enough to assess students' task-based performance. Some teachers even feel annoyed at the grammatical mistakes that students make though teachers totally understand that task-based activities allow students to decide what language

they have in order to get their meaning across (Dao, 2016). This irritation is understandable because of the examination-oriented language teaching and learning in Asia (Joen, 2005). Obviously, the assessment of students' task-based performance is in the list of obstacles which may inhibit teachers from executing TBLT in the classrooms.

Teachers' role. Teachers with various roles are considered a pivotal element in an educational process. Compared to roles in teacher-centred approaches as a leader, an assessor or a knowledge provider, teachers in TBLT-based classrooms are regarded as mediator of language learning who selects learning content, identifies learning objectives, determines assessment methods, provides instructions and promotes students' motivation. In a narrow sense, Willis (1996) made a specific categorization of teachers' roles based on three stages of a task-based lesson. That is, the teacher in the pre-task stage is supposed to present and define a topic, provide new words or phrases, make a model of an activity, etc. in order to make students understand what and how to do a task. Next, the teacher needs to act as a monitor and a motivator to stimulate learners' participation in the task. Besides, the teacher is a language advisor who gives students prompt assistance in the review of their oral reports to ensure that they know the purpose of what they are doing. Then a brief feedback on the content and students' performance is presented. In the post-task stage, teacher takes a role as a reviewer of analysis activity and language items emerged from the previous stage.

Previous Studies

Pohan et al. (2016) explored secondary school, high school and vocational teachers' perceptions of TBLT and reasons to support or resist the implementation of TBLT in English classroom practices. There were 55 teachers of 23 schools taking part in the research. The findings indicated that most of the teachers had good understanding of and positive attitudes towards TBLT and believed that TBLT could help increase learners' motivation and small-group interaction. In the Iranian context, Tabatabaei and Hadi (2011) investigated EFL teachers' views on implementing TBLT and the reasons for their choice or avoidance of TBLT. A questionnaire was distributed to 51 EFL teachers. The result revealed that most teachers understood the concept and principles of TBLT well, and they welcomed the new experience although there were a few negative views on the application of this approach.

In Vietnam, Le and Barnard (2009) investigated the application of TBLT regarding curricular innovation at high schools. According to several researchers in English language education, the curricular innovation is more complicated than people thought (Carless, 2001; Fullan, 1993; Karvas-Doukas, 1996). The qualitative data collected from classroom observation and in-depth interviews with EFL teachers showed the constraints in language teaching and learning. The findings of this research also revealed that there was a gap in terms of learning outcomes between curricular innovation designers and practitioners due to some reasons such as pressure for examination, lack of learning resources, time, and motivation.

Recently, Phuong (2016) conducted a study in which the author served as an observer in a writing class. The research participant in her study was a teacher who had ten years of teaching experience with Presentation-Practice-Production approach and attended a training course in TBLT at the Teacher Education Institute recently. In the study, the teacher taught two English writing classes: PPP-based and TBLT-based classes. After the thirty-hour experiment over ten weeks, she reported a lot of differences between these two approaches through the diary and stimulated recall interviews. The results presented that lesson preparation, teaching time and familiarity of PPP were a burden to the teacher in the implementation of TBLT in the classroom. Moreover, the teacher also faced a lot of challenges in the feedback procedure (i.e., the openness of the tasks, appropriate time to give feedback and types of feedback). Another study on teachers' understanding of TBLT and its

application was carried out by Dao (2016). The study examined university teachers' perceptions of the implementation of TBLT at a public university where English is the medium of instruction through the employment of observation and semi-structured interview. The qualitative results revealed that the teachers were afraid of TBLT due to the inappropriateness of TBLT to exam preparation although they were in favour of TBLT.

Methodology

Research Setting

This study was carried out at sixteen secondary schools, Vung Tau City – a coastal city in Southern Vietnam. In the academic year 2018 – 2019, it was the first time that teachers and students at all secondary schools in Ba Ria-Vung Tau province had used the ten-year English program according to the Official Dispatch No. 809/SGDĐT-GDTrH, issued by BRVT-DOET on May 17, 2018. That is to say, only sixth graders experienced the new English curriculum with the new textbook while the old English curriculum was still applied to students in grades 7-9. As planned, all secondary school students in Ba Ria-Vung Tau province will have applied the new set of English textbooks after this school year.

As far as the new English textbooks grades 6-9 are concerned, MOET (2006) declares that they are task-based with communicative tasks particularly helpful in order to improve students' communication skills, develop comprehensive language skills, cultivate positive attitudes as well as cross-culture awareness and form independent learning competency. In other words, the textbooks with task-based lessons help promote communicative abilities of students through four macro skills with a focus on speaking and listening skills. More importantly, all the four skills of language learning are always integrated in activities, which helps learners develop fluency naturally and confidently. In contrast, the format of the new English textbooks is greatly different from the old ones. For example, whilst the old English textbook grade 6 has five core parts in each unit, namely Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing, and Language Focus, the new one is composed of seven parts in each unit, viz. Getting started, A close look 1, A close look 2, Communication, Skills 1, Skills 2, Looking back, and Project that are closely associated with each other by a chain of tasks in ascending levels of difficulty. The main aim of the new series of textbooks is to maximize learners' exposure to the target language using their own prior knowledge.

The textbooks used for the new English curriculum are designed with task-based activities to help students improve their communicative competence (MOET, 2006). Therefore, BRVT-DOET held some training courses for teachers to get acquainted with this new teaching method. Besides, BRVT-DOET made some decisions related to the new curriculum such as increasing one more period in the official timetable and providing reference materials for the new English textbook. All in all, secondary teachers have been equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills to carry out the classroom activities using task-based instructions.

As reported by Bang Lang (2018), the quality of English teaching and learning in Vung Tau City, a metropolis of Ba Ria-Vung Tau province, has been considerably upgraded in recent years. Each school has some well-equipped laboratory rooms to support the language teaching and learning. The learning aids such as cassette players, pictures, and books are always available in the library. The teachers are active and willing to adapt to the updated language teaching and learning approach. However, the number of students in each class is a big obstacle for the opportunities of interaction and communication among students in the classroom. Furthermore, secondary students seem to be quite active and need a lot of observation from teachers, which causes a lot of noise or indiscipline

in the classroom. Obviously, not to mention the advantages, there exist some drawbacks in language teaching and learning in Vung Tau City.

Participants

There were 101 Vietnamese teachers of English from sixteen secondary schools in Vung Tau City participating in the survey. At first, five of those teachers conveniently selected to take part in the pilot study did the questionnaire, and two out of five teachers voluntarily joined the interview then. For the main study, convenience sampling method was also used to choose 96 participants (i.e., 86 females and 10 males). In particular, the researchers contacted the secondary school EFL teachers that they have known and then asked these teachers to introduce their colleagues to the researchers. Out of 96 participants, 16 teachers of English from sixteen secondary schools were invited for the individual interviews at their convenience. Concerning educational background, most of the participants had a Bachelor's degree (96.9%) and only three teachers (3.1%) earned an Associate's degree. With regard to working experience, 72.9% teachers have taught English for over 10 years. There were 17 teachers whose English teaching experience was from six to ten years (17.7 %), and only 9.4% of them have worked as a teacher of English for approximately five years. In respect of TBLT-related knowledge, all of the teachers in Vung Tau City took the training course of TBLT organized by BRVT-DOET, so they have gained basic knowledge of TBLT and thus known how to implement task-based instructions in their teaching practices.

Instruments

The questionnaire in this study which was adapted from that of Joen and Hahn (2005) was comprised of two parts. The first part asked about demographic information of participants such as gender, educational background, the number of years of teaching English, the name of the secondary schools they worked for. The second part explored challenges EFL teachers faced in TBLT-based classrooms. This part focused on two sub-variables: (1) objective challenges (6 items) and (2) subjective challenges (3 items). The former was relating to materials, class size, time, curriculum, etc., whereas the latter referred to teachers' English proficiency, knowledge of and attitudes toward TBLT. These items were designed using the five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree).

A semi-structured interview was used in this study as a means of data collection apart from the questionnaire because it explores in-depth information of research issues. The content of the interview also focused on possible difficulties teachers have encountered in TBLT-based classrooms. The individual interviews with each teacher encouraged teachers to share their viewpoints on TBLT-based classrooms straightforwardly. The teachers were labelled from T1 to T12 according to the order of interviews.

To increase the validity and reliability of the instruments, the questionnaire and the interview questions were first designed in English and reviewed by an expert who has conducted a lot of research on teaching methodology. Then they were translated into Vietnamese and cross-checked between us to ensure the accuracy of the translation. Next, these instruments were piloted prior to the main study because a pilot study is known to be able to help increase reliability, validity, and practicality of research instruments (Oppenheim, 1999; Radhakrishna, 2007). Finally, Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α =.78) was calculated to ensure the internal consistency of the questionnaire items in this study. If the Cronbach's alpha is greater than .70, the items will be reliable (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). This means that the items in the questionnaire were reliable enough for the data collection.

Data Collection and Analysis

The Vietnamese questionnaire was administered to 96 teachers of 16 secondary schools at their convenience. The teachers spent about 10 minutes completing the questionnaire. After that, the data collected from the questionnaire were processed by SPSS version 20 using descriptive statistics (i.e., Mean & Standard Deviation). The five-point Likert scale was interpreted as follows: 1.00 – 1.80: Strongly disagree; 1.81 – 2.60: Disagree; 2.61 – 3.40: Neutral; 3.41 – 4.20: Agree; 4.21 – 5.00: Strongly agree.

After collecting the questionnaire, the researchers conducted individual interviews with 16 teachers at their schools with the pre-determined timetable. The qualitative data were analysed based on content analysis. First, the researchers read and reread information put in an Excel file. Following this, they coded the information to identify larger categories. Lankshear and Knobel (2004, p. 271) pinpointed, "coding data refers simply to the process of applying codes to collected information that "flag" or remind the researcher about which data belongs in which categories." Then they examined the relationship of the categories to determine the themes before interpreting the significant findings.

Results

To answer the research question, the data generated from the questionnaire were statistically analysed and the information collected from the semi-structured interviews were presented.

Objective Challenges of Applying TBLT in the Classroom

Table 1 illustrated the participants' opinion about the challenges which secondary teachers of English in 16 secondary schools in Vung Tau City faced during the practice of TBLT. As can be seen in Table 1, one of the most burdensome reasons causing the reluctance of using TBLT in the classrooms was the large number of students in each class (M=4.65, SD=.649). The reason received the second place was that TBLT was not useful for exam preparation (M=4.13, SD=.715). Time-consuming preparation and psychological burden were also difficulties preventing teachers from using TBLT (M=3.93, SD=.785; M=3.88, SD=.909, respectively). Additionally, many teachers agreed with the idea that TBLT reduces learners' grammar proficiency (M=3.70, SD=9.85). Relating to the materials in the textbook, however, most of the teachers showed their disagreement about the suitability of the activities in the textbook (M=2.01, SD=.641).

Table 1. Objective Difficulties in the Application of TBLT

Item	Content	N = 96	
		M	**SD**
4	Large class size is an obstacle to use TBLT.	4.65	.649
8	TBLT is not useful for exam preparation.	4.13	.715
1	TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other approaches.	3.93	.785
2	TBLT gives much psychological burden for teachers as a facilitator.	3.88	.909
9	TBLT reduces learners' grammar proficiency.	3.70	.985
3	Activities in the textbook are not proper to use TBLT.	2.01	.641

Based on the qualitative data gained from the interview, the majority of informants admitted that preparation time for new lessons was one of their main concerns in the implementation of TBLT in the classroom. Four teachers (T1, T2, T6 & T8) emphasized that preparing task-based lessons was

tiring to them. Three teachers (T3, T5 & T16) explained that task-based lessons required a lot of creativity, so it took them a lot of time to design a task. Even, most of teachers (excluding T3, T7 & T16) revealed that the time for preparing task-based lessons put a pressure on them. According to T3, T7, and T16, conversely, although it was tiring and difficult to prepare a task-based lesson, teachers could reuse and adjust it for the following school years. Furthermore, as long as their students felt happy with the lessons, they were ready to spend time on designing task-based lessons.

Concerning with teachers' roles in task-based classrooms, when being asked whether or not teachers felt stressed in facilitating students' learning in task-based classrooms, all the respondents answered "yes"; nevertheless, the reason for the stress, according to them, mainly came from their unfamiliarity of using TBLT. Five teachers (T1, T3, T4, T8 & T10) frankly admitted that they were kind of serious people, so they found it hard to accept some changes in the roles of teachers. Furthermore, four teachers (T2, T5, T6 & T11) asserted that they did not know much about how to facilitate students in task-based lessons. The other teachers (T7, T14, T15 & T16) reported that they often wondered if their students had any difficulties during the tasks or they provided their students with necessary information. Generally, teachers seemed to be unconfident in their role as a facilitator in the task-based classrooms.

The activities in the textbook received great attention from the secondary school EFL teachers in Vung Tau City. Two teachers (T13 & T14) considered a larger number of activities in the textbook a reason for their hesitation of using TBLT. That is, they were afraid that in-class teaching time might not cover all the activities. The rest of the teachers offered a compliment to the new English textbook and confirmed that the activities were best designed and taught in the task-based approach.

> Teachers still have to adjust the tasks in the new English textbook, but basically, the activities meet typical characteristics of TBLT such as connecting to real-life settings, containing communicative purpose, etc. (T9)

> Of course, not all the activities were TBLT-based, yet most of the activities could help promote students' communication and interaction in the target language. (T7)

Additionally, the respondents recognised that large class size was their major obstacle. According to them, the number of students in each class ranged from 48 to 52, and all the teachers found it strenuous to manage the class as well as carry out the activities effectively. Some teachers (T2, T4, T5, T10 & T13) shared that they were terrified of the noise caused by students' interaction during the tasks, or some of them (T1, T7 & T16) were worried about limited time allotted for each task.

As far as the uselessness for exam preparation is concerned, there was a lot of support from the sixteen teachers. They stated that students needed to be well-prepared for exam because their learning would be evaluated through marks. Therefore, they were really worried if the lessons were taught in the task-based way. This was one of the reasons causing their reluctance of using TBLT in the classrooms. However, T7 and T16 shared that students had two more class meetings in the afternoon each week to practice their skills of doing grammar exercises. Therefore, they were willing to apply TBLT in the morning class meetings.

Another problem preventing the teachers in Vung Tau City from implementing TBLT was decreasing learners' grammar proficiency. Most of the interviewees viewed this matter as one of the biggest challenges to the application of TBLT in their classrooms. Many teachers (T1, T2, T4, T5, T8, T10, T12 & T15) told that students tended to focus on communicative skills rather than grammar proficiency. Especially, T2 emphasized that the avoidance of correcting grammatical errors in TBLT made students underestimate grammar. However, T16 explains:

Most of the teachers felt worried about students' grammar proficiency because grammar rules were not corrected during the speaking time. That is understandable. However, they forgot that teachers and students had two extra classes each week to review the important grammar points. Not to mention, TBLT could be used to teach grammar though it was quite time-consuming. (T16)

Subjective Challenges of Applying TBLT in the Classroom

Table 2 demonstrated that subjective challenges the teachers encountered during their teaching process. As shown in Table 2, the teachers seemed to be confident in their knowledge of TBLT because they mostly disagreed with the idea relating to limited knowledge of TBLT (M=2.06, SD=.678). With reference to the target language ability, a few teachers admitted they have limited English language proficiency (M=1.94, SD=.539). That is, they were confident about their English language skills. However, several teachers stated that they got in trouble with the assessment of learners' task-based performance (M=3.91, SD=.884).

Table 2. Subjective Difficulties in the Execution of TBLT

Item	Content	N = 96	
		M	**SD**
5	I have difficulties in assessing learner task-based performance.	3.91	.884
7	I have little knowledge of TBLT.	2.06	.678
6	I have limited target language proficiency.	1.94	.539

The data in Table 2 showed that challenges from internal causes led to the hesitation in the application of TBLT in the classrooms among the secondary teachers in Vung Tau City. Particularly, thirteen teachers in the interviews disclosed that they found it really challenging to mark students' leaning performance in the task-based classroom. Some explanations from T1, T4, T5 and T8 were associated with the lack of experience in assessment though they had been trained to do this.

When assessing student's performance, I wondered if I missed any characteristics of a task or which grammatical structures I should ignore and remind my students. (T4)

Sometimes, I felt confused to decide marks for my students because I was afraid that I forgot something in the assessment. (T5)

Some teachers (T3, T6, T7, T10 & T11) divulged that despite their knowledge of assessment, they were too familiar with the traditional assessment methods and found it hard to change their habit. T2 and T12 said that the assessment of students' performance in the task-based classrooms seemed to be less challenging because TBLT concentrated more on meaning than form.

I found it difficult to mark students because of the focus on the meaning of a task. I thought that it was not good if we ignored grammar mistakes, but I was not sure of which grammar mistakes I should pay attention to. (T12)

Concerning the ability to use the target language, all the interviewed teachers referred to their certificate of Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency as an evidence for their English proficiency. However, T1 and T2 admitted that they had difficulties in giving task-based instructions in English, so they dared not apply TBLT in the classroom. T14 and T15 expressed the idea that, they wished to take advantages of this chance to practice their English communication

skills despite lack of confidence in their speaking and listening skills. Similarly, six teachers (T5, T7, T8, T11, T12 & T16) revealed that they had some training courses about this teaching method and observed some classes using TBLT already; therefore, they showed the willingness to apply TBLT in their classrooms with unavoidable modifications. On the contrary, some teachers (T2, T3, T6 & T9) admitted that it was quite vague for them to conduct TBLT in their classrooms, but they confirmed that they would try to do more practice and learn from real-life situations in their TBLT-based classrooms.

Discussion

Objective Challenges

As presented above, large class is the biggest obstacle which made teachers avoid applying TBLT in the English classroom. This is compatible with the findings in other studies on the implementation of TBLT into primary or tertiary classrooms in Asian countries and regions such as Mainland China, Hong Kong, Korea, and Vietnam (Carless, 2001; Dao, 2016, Joen, 2005; Li, 1998; Zhang, 2007). Turning to details, the sixteen teachers in secondary schools in Vung Tau City made a list of difficulties relating to the large classes which prevented them from the application of TBLT such as different levels of proficiency and class management. First, Butler (2005) affirmed that EFL teachers are generally afraid of large classes and mixed-levels classes in Asian contexts. For example, Chao and Wu (2008) indicated that selecting appropriate tasks for mixed-levels classes challenged teachers. Second, according to sixteen secondary teachers in Vung Tau City, managing the classroom through tasks in large and mixed-levels classes caused a lot of difficulties. This is consistent with other findings of other researchers; for instance, Cortazzi and Jin (1996) showed that the good classroom management was related to good control of volume and restriction of disruption during tasks. In this sense, Ellis (2003) categorized TBLT as a task of participatory structures (e.g., whole class, small group, pair, individual). Regarding the noise-related matter, Carless (2004) pointed out that noise emerged from pair or group work proves that students are really engaged in using the language to complete a task; therefore, teachers need to differentiate this kind of noise with the noise of classroom disorder.

The second obstacle the teachers encountered in executing TBLT in the classroom is that TBLT was not appropriate for language knowledge-focused national examinations. Some of the interviewees expressed their worries that students did not have enough knowledge to pass the examinations with flying colours. This anxiety is the same with what were found in other previous studies (Chow & Cheng; 2004; Hu, 2002; Li, 1998; Shim & Biak, 2000). According to Hu (2002), for example, one of the influential causes hindering the innovation of teaching methodology was the norm-referenced exams in China. Also, Korean summative or knowledge-based high-stake exams are main barriers to the application of TBLT (Shim & Biak, 2000). In this study, the teachers in the interview had the same feelings when being asked about the influence of exam results on student learning. However, some of them showed their optimism about the use of TBLT in the classroom with the explanation that students had two or three classes for grammar practice in the afternoon sessions.

Preparation time and psychological burdens are the other two reasons for the hesitation in the implantation of TBLT in Vung Tau City. This finding is in line with Jeon and Hahn's (2006) study on teachers' perceptions of implementing TBLT in the English classroom. Most of the teachers admitted that tasks required too much time for preparing as well as great efforts of teachers. As for preparation time for tasks in this study, the teachers optimistically revealed that they were able to take a lot of time for the first preparation. Furthermore, some teachers stated that the time spending on designing tasks for students helped them get better understanding of the new English textbook

and stimulate their creativity in teaching. According to Samuda and Bygate (2008), the teacher's role as a facilitator may be more complicated in reality because teachers need to adjust lesson plans to meet learners' various needs. Moreover, Asian teachers are influenced by Confucian philosophy, so psychological burden really matters to them (Carless, 2004; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

One of the main concerns is the appropriateness of the activities in the textbook. According to the participants, the new textbook for the ten-year English programme was more interesting and updated with a range of tasks designed for real-life communication. The organization of each lesson is logical according to levels of difficulty (i.e., from easy level to difficult level), which is likely to arouse more participation of students as well as motivate their learning. This finding is also found in earlier studies (Cheng, 2011; Pohan et al., 2016). This means that the textbook is a sufficient learning source.

Subjective Challenges

The confusion about assessing learning performance in task-based classrooms was a significant drawback. In particular, the teachers found it difficult to make an equal assessment of their students' performances. They were also afraid that their students' ability was not evaluated as exactly as usual. This concern is quite similar to the findings in a few studies (Erwin et al., 2016; Jeon & Hahn, 2006). Particularly, the study carried out by Jeon and Hahn (2006) reported that 64% teachers admitted having difficulties in assessing learners' task-based learning performance. However, some of the participants claimed that they would get used to this method soon, and the confusion may consequently disappear.

In terms of teachers' English language proficiency and knowledge of TBLT, several studies have indicated that teachers refused to use teaching innovations because of their incompetence or they believed that only native teachers could help students with English communicative practice (Butler, 2005; Jeon & Hahn, 2006; Li, 1998; Shim, 2001). In this study, however, the teachers stated that they were well-qualified due to their participation into the training courses of the innovative teaching methods with the focus on TBLT held by the government on an annual basis. Furthermore, all of the teachers in Vung Tau City have passed the Vietnamese Standard Framework required by the MOET with C1 or B2 certificates. These results were compatible with the study conducted in the Vietnam context by Dao (2016) concluding that the Vietnamese teachers gained good knowledge of TBLT.

Conclusion

In general, the results gained from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews indicate both objective and subjective challenges the secondary school teachers in Vung Tau encountered when TBLT was implemented. In respect of the objective causes, the big number of students in each class is the most influential obstacle. The second challenge is the exam-focused curriculum, which is incompatible with the focus of TBLT – a meaning-focused approach. More importantly, the teachers were worried about students' final results in examinations after the implementation of TBLT despite the fact that the ten-year English programme applied in Vung Tau City in the school year 2018 – 2019 has required EFL teachers to pay more attention to the communicative goals rather than exam preparation. In addition, time-consuming preparation, the uncertainty about their own role as a facilitator, and decreasing grammar proficiency are identified as the next challenges. Finally, it is noticeable that the participants showed their satisfaction of activities in the textbook thanks to interesting and up-to-date information. As regards the subjective challenges, lack of experiences in assessing learners' performance is viewed as a predominant factor hindering the teachers from applying TBLT in their classrooms effectively. Remarkably, the teachers felt

confident about their understanding of TBLT through regular training courses and their English competence. This means that they are willing to implement TBLT in their teaching practices.

In order to help EFL teachers gain confidence in TBLT-based classrooms, the following pedagogical implications for teachers should be taken into account. Relating to time constraints, Willis and Willis (2007) suggest some time-saving ways, e.g., encouraging students to prepare task-related lexis, do follow-up exercises at home or learn vocabulary independently. Moreover, teachers should make some adaptions rather than strictly following all the stages of a task cycle (Ellis, 2006). This not only reduces the stress of time but also helps teachers escape from the psychology burden in the classroom. Concerning solutions for low-level EFL students, according to Ellis (2009), teachers need to adjust the requirements of the task at an appropriate level or give more support to students by giving more time, providing a model or repeating key items. Ellis (2009) affirms that beginners are taught in task-based ways with the more input or visual support. To help students take examinations with confidence, furthermore, teachers can prepare some follow-up activities to consolidate the grammar points at the end of the lesson. This may make a big contribution to students' use of the target language in both spoken and written forms. Finally, to overcome subjective factors (e.g., teachers' language proficiency, assessment ability and knowledge of TBLT), it is recommended that teachers should attend different workshops or in-depth training from which secondary school teachers will feel inspired to explore this approach in a better way to provide students with effective learning environment. Furthermore, the teaching tips or new techniques are always available on the internet or from other experts of language teaching and learning. At-site seminars or formal discussions are a good means of experience sharing.

The study has made some practical contributions to language teaching and learning at the secondary level in Vung Tau City such as raising EFL teachers' and administrators' awareness of TBLT through presenting difficulties in applying TBLT in a real language classroom); nevertheless, there exist some unavoidable shortcomings First, the sample size of this research was quite small, i.e., 96 teachers of English from 16 secondary schools in Vung Tau City answering the questionnaire and 16 of them taking part in the interviews. The further research should enlarge the sample size to make generalizations about TBLT to other EFL contexts. Besides, this study focused only on the secondary school teachers' perceptions of challenges in implementing TBLT in their classrooms with the employment of the questionnaire and interviews. It is suggested that more instruments such as observation or diaries should be used to scrutinize how TBLT is applied in real-life contexts. Then a comparison between teachers' perceptions and their teaching practices should be further explored.

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About the authors

Dr. Duong My Tham is currently the Vice Dean of the Faculty of English, Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance. She holds a PhD in English language studies from Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand. Apart from having published a variety of research articles in scholarly journals and joined academic conferences annually, she is a reviewer of national and international journals. Her academic areas of interest predominantly lie in learner autonomy, ELT, language skills, CLIL, discourse analysis, and task-based language learning.

Huyen Thi Thanh Nguyen is working as a teacher of English at Nguyen An Ninh secondary school in Vung Tau City. She earned her Master's degree in TESOL at Ba Ria -Vung Tau University, Vietnam. She is interested in TBLT and English language skills.

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